



Paradise
Alley

LIVE
NUDE

BY

JANE DICKSON

Paradise Alley

J A N E D I C K S O N

Paradise Alley

April 11–June 28, 1996

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

The Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

is funded by Philip Morris Companies Inc.

This brochure accompanies “Jane Dickson: Paradise Alley,” which was organized by Thelma Golden, associate curator, Whitney Museum of American Art and branch director, Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris. The essay was written by John Miller, an artist and art critic who lives in New York City.

The artist sincerely thanks Charlie Ahearn, Barry Blinderman, Ted Bonin, Carol Ann Klonarides, Linda Yablonsky, Carol Dickson, and Erica MacKay for all their help in putting this show together.

This exhibition was originally part of a larger traveling exhibition entitled “Peep Land: Paintings by Jane Dickson,” organized by Barry Blinderman at University Galleries of Illinois State University, and supported by grants from the Lannan Foundation, Los Angeles, and the Illinois Arts Council, a State Agency.

Cover: **Paradise Alley**, 1983

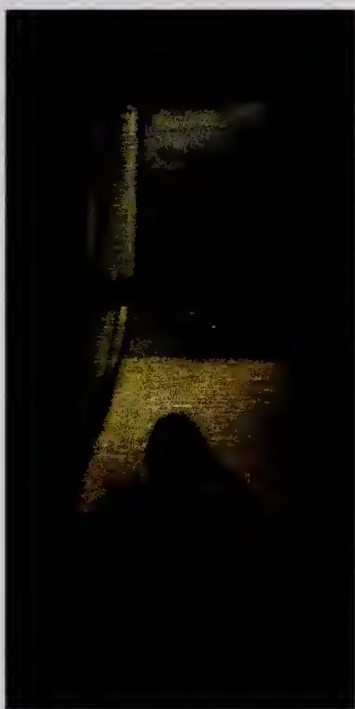
© 1996 Whitney Museum of American Art
945 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10021

Paradise Lost

Paradise Alley: some kind of joke. "Paradise" has to be stuffed down a dark side street. That must make the rest of the world a living hell. One of the first things you notice about the strip joint is the yellow and black silhouettes of go-go dancers painted over the front windows. Framing these are strings of light bulbs. The effect of these windows is unaccountably violent, like the redundancy of brickwork painted over in contrasting colors: red for the bricks, white for the mortar. A car's parked out in front. On the sidewalk, someone's doubled over in the arms of another.

In eleven of the fourteen paintings which survey nine years of Jane Dickson's extended Times Square chronicle, the artist conflates the literal canvas with an implied or depicted window.¹ The point of view, the cropping, and the subject matter immediately convey this; even window frames, blinds, and curtains turn up in the Witness series. The size and proportions of the canvases match the dimensions of standard office or apartment windows as well.

Outside these windows glow signs demanding to be read. Inside, the inevitable spectator looks down onto the street. Although the realist tradition obviously regards painting as a win-



Witness (J.A.), 1991

dow on the world, that tradition seldom so deliberately registers the window as a representational apparatus. The viewer of Dickson's paintings immediately understands the window/ canvas to be both a barrier and a portal which delineates interior and exterior, public and private space. In real life, this separation also legislates the difference between threat and safety. Moreover, it sanctions what kind of looking is socially permissible: from inside, anyone on the street is fair game, but anyone caught peering *into* windows is regarded as a Peeping Tom.



Witness (C.F.), 1991

Walter Benjamin described E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story "The Cousin's Country Window" as "one of the first attempts to capture the street scene of a large city."² Here, the protagonist, a paralytic, scrutinizes from his apartment window the market crowd below as if they were a *tableau vivant*. This practice he justifies as "an exercise in the art of seeing." Significantly, the observer is neither a *flâneur* nor a man of the crowds; his detached position renders street life as primarily a spectacle. This story anticipates the way (but not the social reasons) in which alienation became convention in depictions of the urban milieu. Alfred Hitchcock's movie *Rear Window* similarly shows the voyeurism not of a paralytic but of a photojournalist temporarily confined to his bed. A photojournalist, ironically, is someone paid to look and to make known what she or he has seen. In this respect, the photojournalist is not so different from the artist/auteur. In feminist film criticism, *Rear Window* offers a textbook rendition of scopophilia (sexual pleasure in looking) not only within film grammar but also within social relations in general. Power is negotiated via the gaze, which in a patriarchy typically "belongs" to the male. Hitchcock's protagonist, however, looked out on a Greenwich Village courtyard, not on a Times Square street corner.

Times Square is best known as a headquarters for the sex industry, an industry whose moral dubiousness may have less to do with sex than it does with its links to organized crime. After reports that the Walt Disney Company plans to erect a large family entertainment complex in this area, no one doubts that Times Square soon will be rezoned and "cleaned up." In a sense, it is a living relic. (Curiously, all of Dickson's scenarios in this selection have a dated look; except for the cars, nothing in them seems to have changed for thirty years or more.) The identification of this area as "dirty" is very much predicated upon the way prostitutes are irrationally stigmatized, just as the political economy conversely represses the specter of prostitution haunting legitimized wage labor. As one woman explained: "I've worked in straight jobs where I've felt more like I was prostituting my being than in prostitution. I had less control over my life, and the powerlessness wasn't even up front. People didn't see me as selling myself, but with the minimum wage so little and my boss so insulting, I felt like I was selling my soul."³ Although only one of Dickson's pictures shown



Frisking, 1983

here portrays a stripper, the figure of the female sex worker cannot be entirely divorced from woman's experience of urban public space as threatening, especially at night. If a woman lingers too long on the corner, she will be quickly pegged as a streetwalker.

One might feel at home on the street...or one might be forced to make the streets one's own home. In this set of

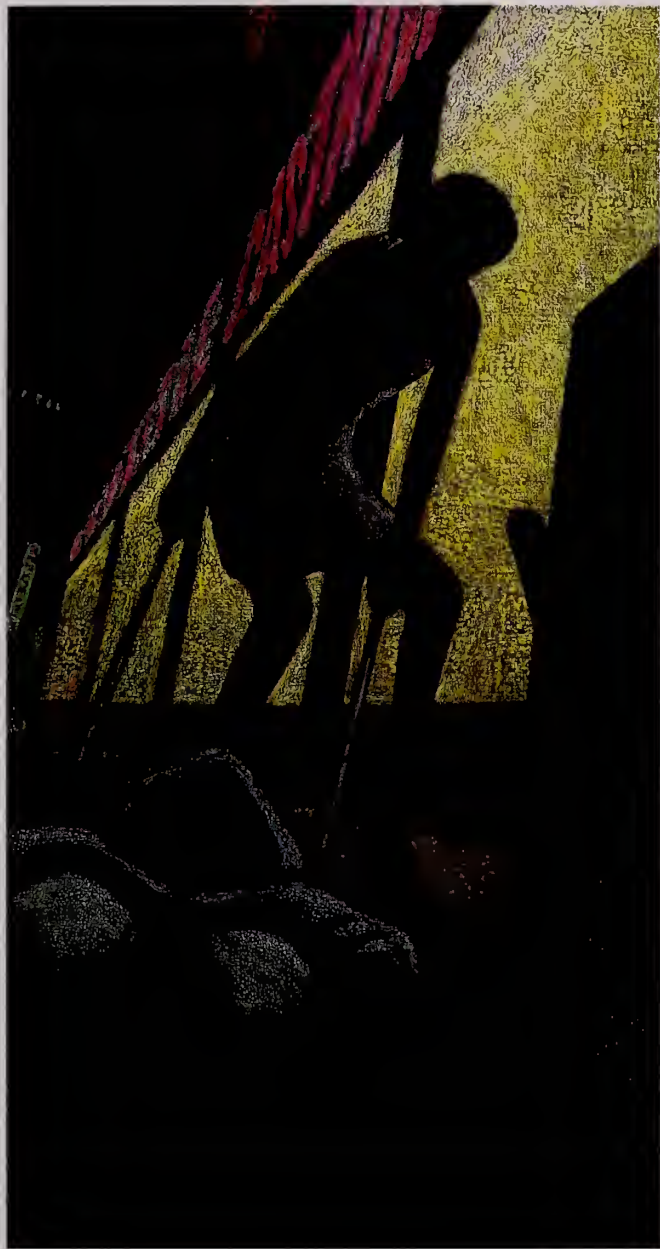
works, the human figure offers the last trace of the organic or “natural” to be seen anywhere. It shrinks before a boundless architectonic grid. The city lights even blot out the stars overhead. The urban landscape appears as an entirely man-made world, a veritable “second nature.” The law of this asphalt jungle would seem to be survival of the fittest. In other words, the arbitrary inequities of the social and economic system even in this extremely artificial milieu come to be naturalized as the would-be products of an evolutionary process. Although the street is a common territory where people from all walks of life come together, as Susan Buck-Morss notes, the experience of life on the street is hardly uniform: “For the politically oppressed...existence in public space is...synonymous with state surveillance, public censure and political constraint.”⁴ Two works



1600 Broadway, 1983



Gem Liquors, 1983



Mother and Child, 1985

from 1983, **Frisking** and **1600 Broadway**, show police interrogation to be one of the events which recurs regularly outside the windows. **Mother and Child** (1985) and **Gem Liquors** (1983) show women negotiating deserted nighttime streets with children in tow. The public appearance of “bag ladies” comes off as a particularly cruel joke: “...carrying their worldly possessions in worn bags (from Bloomingdale’s, perhaps)...,” it looks like “...they have just returned from a shopping spree.”⁵

The Witness series reverses the point of view, positioning the viewer outside the window looking in at obscure figures who are themselves caught looking. This reciprocity between viewer and image, underscored by the window trope, makes clear the “double-staging” implicit in every realist picture. Just as perspective maps the space within the canvas, it simultaneously triangulates the position of the viewer on the other side. Just what is it that the witnesses witness? To what extent should they take responsibility for what they see? And, by extension, to what extent must we, the viewers? The moral statement in Dickson’s work comes not from any overt intervention in her subject matter; this, she offers without comment. Rather, it lies in her directing the viewer’s gaze to what it has been trained not to see. This writer, who grew up in a small Ohio town, remembers his mother’s first visit to New York City. A drunken man was lying in the gutter:

“Look! We have to stop and help him.”

“No. You don’t do that here.”

During the day, the city is the locus for a continuous series of changing impressions or “shocks”: sights, smells, sounds, the exchange of glances with a steady stream of anonymous passersby. At night, the pace slows down and electric lighting makes dazzling facades for even the dumpiest of quarters. Even so, a mute brutality dominates the relative emptiness. Typically, one would expect luminosity from Dickson’s windows, but she begins by painting her canvases black. Sometimes she prepares the ground with Roll-A-Tex, a readymade texturing compound. Over this, she often sketches the scene in oilstick with highly saturated colors. Dickson’s technique is keyed not so much to the conventional depiction of reflected light as it is to that of direct light sources. These oilstick strokes have a slightly cruddy feeling, beads of the substance congealing against the grain of the canvas or Rolotex. The brute yet deadened physicality of the stroke as such becomes an analogy for the everyday shock of urban experience.

The sign on the strip joint, Paradise Alley, alludes to a myth which throws into sharp relief what the reality of city life is for the vulnerable and the dispossessed. In biblical terms, paradise refers to the Garden of Eden. God banished Adam and Eve from paradise for having tasted fruit from the Tree of Knowledge: sexuality. They were made to work as punish-

ment for their sin. At the level of fantasy, then, Paradise Alley promises to deliver its clientele from the responsibility to work *and* the guilt attached to sex. Objectively, however, it's abundantly clear that sex, in almost any form, hurts no one (so long as the right precautions are taken), while a system which fails to provide adequate jobs, food, and shelter wreaks havoc on the masses. This violence is not the desperation of the petty criminal, but the routine and systemic exploitation of those with little or no means to protect themselves.

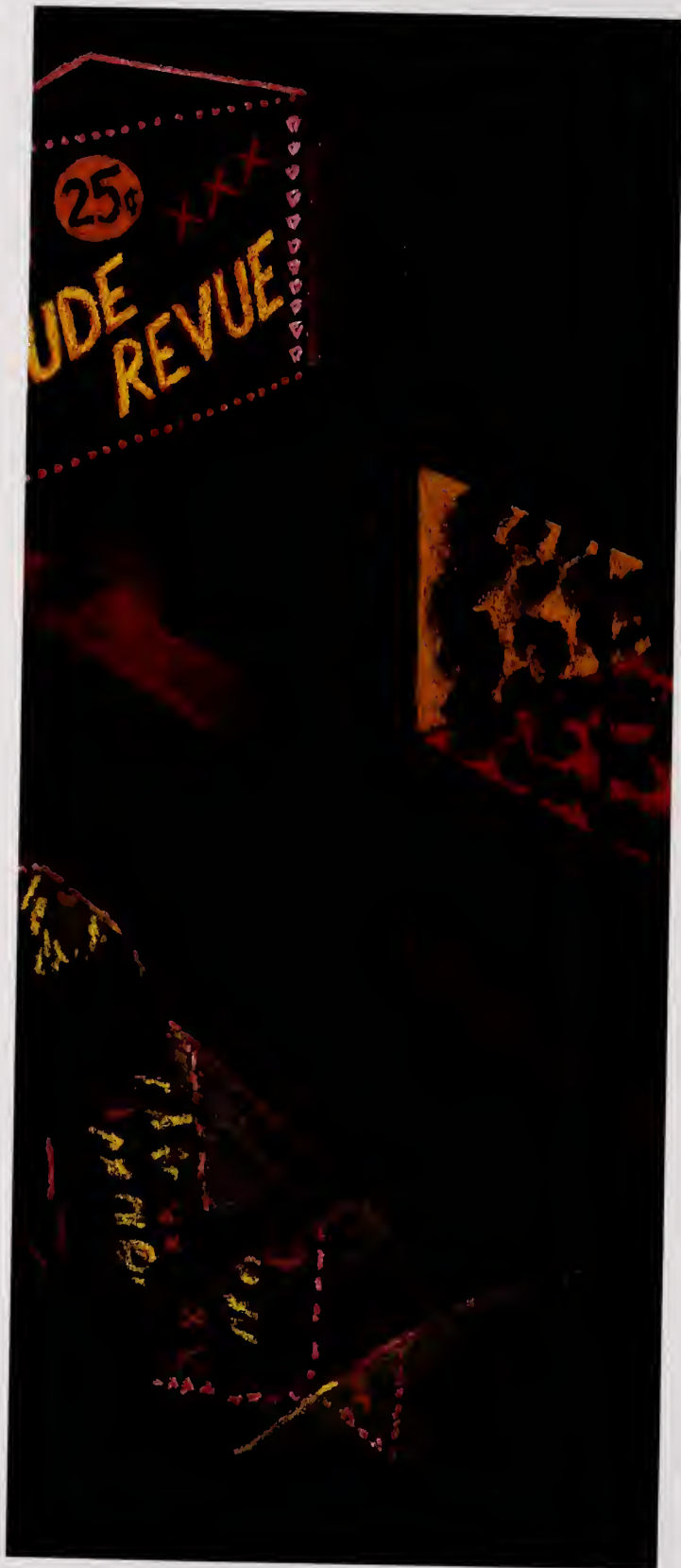
1. The exceptions are **Green Garage** (1983), **Mother and Child** (1985), and **Stripper II** (1983).

2. Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 173.

3. The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, "Violence Against Women—Appendix: Prostitution," *The New Our Bodies, Ourselves* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), p. 113. Susan Buck-Morss notes that in a social system erected upon the elaborately regulated exchange of women (as gifts, cf., Lévi-Strauss), the whore, as a fantasy figure, promises to liberate her buyer from these constraints; see "The Flâneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering," *New German Critique*, 39 (Fall 1986), pp. 120–125.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

5. *Ibid.*



Nude Review, 1983



Green Garage, 1983

Biography

born in Chicago, 1952

Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

- 1996** Black & Herron Space, New York, “Who Do You Think You Are?”
- 1995** University Galleries of Illinois State University, Normal, “Peep Land: Paintings by Jane Dickson” (catalogue, traveled)
- 1993** Creative Time, New York, “The Bride, 42nd St. Art Project”
Ann Jaffe Gallery, Bay Harbor Islands, Florida, “Dickson, Dill”
- 1992** Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York, “Trust Me”
- 1991** The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, “Selected Prints”
- 1990** Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York
- 1989** Goldie Paley Gallery, Moore College of Art and Design, Philadelphia, “Jane Dickson: Life Under Neon” (catalogue)

- 1988 Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York
Fawbush Gallery, New York, "Jane Dickson:
Drawings"
- 1986 Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York
- 1984 Brooke Alexander Gallery, New York, "Jane Dickson:
Works on Paper, 1983–1984"
- 1983 Delahunty Gallery, New York
- 1982 Fun Gallery, New York, "New Work"
- 1980 Fashion Moda, Bronx, New York, "The City Maze"

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1996 The Drawing Center, New York, "Cultural
Economies: Histories from the Alternative Arts
Movement, NYC"
- 1995 The Museum of Modern Art, New York, "Published
by Joe Fawbush"
- 1994 Galerie de l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts de Lorient,
"Le Temps d'un Dessin"
Kunstverein, Hamburg, "Children in Crisis"
North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, "New York,
New York"
Odakyu Museum, Tokyo, "New York Realism—Past
and Present" (catalogue, traveled)
- 1993 Creative Time, New York, "42nd Street Art Project"
- 1990 Artists Space, New York, "Witnesses: Against Our
Vanishing"
- 1989 National Gallery of Art, Washington, "The 1980's
Prints from the Collection of Joshua P. Smith"
(catalogue)
Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable
Center, "Nocturnal Visions in Contemporary
Painting"
- 1988 Kunst Rai 88, Amsterdam, "Eien Keuze/A Choice"
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,
"The 1980's: A New Generation"
The Museum of Modern Art, New York,
"Committed to Print" (catalogue)

- 1987 Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley,
Massachusetts, "A Graphic Muse: Prints by
Contemporary American Women"
Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris,
"Viewer as Voyeur"
- 1986 The Kitchen, New York, "Arts and Leisure: Group
Material"
- 1985 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, "1985
Biennial Exhibition," Group Material installation
(catalogue)
- 1984 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,
Washington, D.C., "Content: A Contemporary Focus"
(catalogue)
Lisson Gallery Ltd., London, "London/New York"
Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris,
"On 42nd Street"
- 1980 Collaborative Projects, New York, "Times Square
Show"

Awards

Dewars Young Artist Award

National Endowment for the Arts, Drawing

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches; height precedes width.

Study for White-Haired Girl, 1982

Oilstick on canvas, 16 x 20

Collection of the artist

Frisking, 1983

Oilstick on canvas, 90 x 40

Collection of Michael and B.Z. Schwartz

Gem Liquors, 1983

Oilstick on canvas, 90 x 40

Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Peter W. Broido

Green Garage, 1983

Oilstick on canvas, 66 x 74 1/4

Collection of Herbert and Hannah Halberg

Hotel Girl, 1983

Oilstick on canvas, 82 x 44

Collection of Martin Sklar

Nude Review, 1983

Oilstick on canvas, 90 x 40

Collection of Kent Logan

Paradise Alley, 1983

Oilstick on canvas, 90 x 40

The Forbes Magazine Collection, New York

1600 Broadway, 1983

Oilstick on canvas, 90 x 40

Collection of Arlene Nussdorf

Stripper II, 1983

Oilstick on canvas, 11 x 17

Collection of the artist

Study for Woman at the Window, 1983

Oilstick on canvas, 42 x 19

Collection of Susan Inglett



Witness (B.E.), 1991

Mother and Child, 1985

Oilstick on linen, 80 x 42 1/2

Collection of Charlie Ahearn

Witness (B.E.), 1991

Oil and Roll-A-Text on canvas, 70 x 35

Collection of the artist

Witness (C.F.), 1991

Oil and Roll-A-Text on canvas, 70 x 35

Collection of Philip Dapeer

Witness (J.A.), 1991

Oil and Roll-A-Text on canvas, 70 x 35

Collection of Paine Webber Group, Inc., New York

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

Park Avenue at 42nd Street

New York, New York 10017

Gallery Hours

Monday–Friday, 11:00 am–6:00 pm

Thursday, 11:00 am–7:30 pm

Sculpture Court Hours

Monday–Saturday, 7:30 am–9:30 pm

Sunday, 11:00 am–7:00 pm

Gallery Talks

Monday and Friday at 1:00 pm

Free admission

Tours by appointment

For more information, call (212) 878-2453

Staff

Thelma Golden

Associate Curator and Branch Director

Jeanette Vuocolo

Manager

Lisa Archambeau

Gallery Assistant, Exhibition Programs

Allison Smith

Gallery Assistant, Education Programs

Jeffrey B. Hopkins

Receptionist

Design: Bethany Johns Design

Printing: Herlin Press

Photography: John Abbott: cover, 3, 10, 11

D. James Dee: 1, 2

Debra Riseberg: 6

Ivan Dalla Tana: 7

